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Mesa Verde Cliff Dwellings Excavated

Lyle Bennett, as Ranger and Official Artist at National Park, Helped
Unearth Remains of Civilization Over 800 Years Old,
And Restored and Sketched Pottery

STRONGER than the lure of gold is the fever that grips the excavator in his attempt to unravel the mysteries of ages past. And despite the meager pay and hardships often accompanying such a vocation, not a few have given their lives to this pursuit.

Something of its fascination is known to Lyle Bennett, student in the University and art editor of this year's *Savitar*. A year ago last fall Bennett was out of school and went to Colorado for his health. He took a position as guide and official artist in Mesa Verde National Park.

People of Columbia were given the opportunity to see and hear of this region recently when Arthur Monroe, former United States ranger

which they tried to conceal. The thrill of the approach of excavation time began to be felt in various ways. From the conversation one could hear little snatches of past adventure, stories of horses slipping off the canyon paths, of packs being lost or of cold and hunger endured. Before the month was over a party of eight started on their trip.

The first find made was a skeleton which Bennett uncovered. With the body had been buried vessels the bottoms of which had holes in them. This was to signify that the vessels are no longer for practical use but that something had been taken out of them, as life has passed out of the body. With but one exception the arrangement of every skeleton found in this region indicates that the body was buried in a flexed or natal position. The conclusion is drawn from this that these people thought that in order to be received back into the unknown the body should be in the same position as that in which it enters this world. This one exception, it is thought, was probably the body of some chief or ruler; in order to keep his spirit with the people they buried his body in a straightened position so that his soul would not pass on. This idea is further strengthened by the fact that the body was found buried in a kiva, or ceremonial room, so that the people must have had the inconvenience of building a new one.

A day or so after discovering this first burial, Bennett discovered a second one, which yielded six bowls and a stone mortar. A friend decided to work with him and found a baby burial with two beautiful bowls. By this time the rest of the party could not stand the temptation, so they deserted their diggings and came en masse to Bennett's, surrounding him so that he could not enlarge his trench, and thereby humiliate them with any more finds. The director then had Bennett start a trench a little distance away and within two feet of his starting point he discovered his third burial with several pieces of pottery. At no time were any of the other members over a few feet away but it seemed that phenomenal luck reserved the important spots for him. Finding all the promising ground now being worked by his companions, Bennett began working in the trench they had deserted and in a day's work found the largest skeleton in the plot. The next burial uncovered was of a little child and with it was remarkably artistic pottery. Some mother, over 800 years ago, had placed these lovely articles beside the body, the small bones of which had almost vanished in the dust.

The rest of the party took Bennett's luck and their failure as a matter of course. The day following this last find a heavy blanket of snow covered the mesa and transformed the evergreens into hummocks of white. The party then made their headquarters in a little house that had been built there and their activities were confined for a while to patrols made over the Indian trails for signs of invasions into their territory by the Utes

for deer. Long before the hardest weather came, supplies had been brought and stored for the coming winter's excavation trips.

When March came, the party started excavating again. They established a camp consisting of three tents for sleeping quarters and one for grub. Bennett contributed to the equipment with a stove which he built of stone laid in adobe. Others made benches and stands. During this season the party excavated in seven different ruins, all within a radius of three miles, and made many interesting discoveries, including the burial in a kiva mentioned previously.

The worst part of excavation, according to Bennett, is the dust which has accumulated for cen-



Cliff Palace, where, over eight centuries ago, hundreds of cliff dwellers made their home.

gave an illustrated lecture on "The Land of the Vanished Footsteps."

The park is located in the southwest corner of the state of Colorado and is the only park set aside for its archeological interest as well as for scenic attraction. From the north rim of the mesa, which stands 8500 feet in elevation, one looks 2000 feet below into the Montezuma Valley. Far to the north the valley stretches, with here and there a small cluster of houses indicating a town, until it finally ends in a range of mountains over a hundred miles away. To the west lies the Sleeping Ute, a mountain shaped like a sleeping Indian and which the Utes say will some day come back to life.

To the south rises the phantom ship of the sandy, dry desert of the Navajos, and further south, the Lukka Chukka and Carisso Mountains of New Mexico and Arizona. To the southeast stretches the bad lands into New Mexico and far to the east, on clear days, one can catch glimpses of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

The park covers 50,000 acres of a high table land, rising precipitously out of the Montezuma Valley and slowly descending to a point eight miles to the south where it drops suddenly into the Mancos River. Deep canyons run north and south cutting the mesa into many narrow strips. Covering the mesa is a thick growth of pinyon and cedar trees which grow into many weird and fantastic shapes due to their difficult existence in the hard sandstone.

This land, so significantly located by nature, has been the scene of several civilizations which migrated in, built their homes and lived there many years and then disappeared. Who these people were, where they came from, how they lived, why they left and where they went to are problems intensely interesting from a human as well as an archeological standpoint.

To find out more about their life has been the urge inspiring excavators in this region. Each winter a small number of the regular employees of the park spend several weeks in excavating the cliff ruins and their adventures and finds are often exciting. It was Bennett's experience to go along on one of these trips and it was his good fortune beginner's luck, he calls it to be the most successful one of the party in his finds.

Regular excavation was scheduled for February and March, but in November it was decided to locate a Pueblo burial. As the brush in the canyons added golds and deep reds to the blues and violets of the shadow of the canyon each day in November passed, crisp, cold and clear. The sky was so blue that it seemed as if one should be able to touch it. A change appeared in the old timers



This is the safest, but not the easiest, way of slipping out of a cliff ruin.



Location of these houses on the precipitous cliffs prevented invasion by the visitors.

turies in the back of the caves and in the rooms. It is very fine, dry and penetrating, making it necessary to wear respirators if one works in it or any length of time. For a man who does not wear them, sore throat and inflamed sinuses are the result. Besides this, the dust has the peculiar effect of giving a man slight attacks of chills and fever, much as if one had the "flu." Next to the dust, the cactus which rats pack into the ruins is most annoying. Almost as much time is spent removing cactus from one's clothes and body as is spent in troweling.

In his role of official artist Bennett sketched many designs and decorations found in the kivas and restored much of the pottery. They are restored from the potsherds. In describing his job, Bennett said "Imagine, if you can, taking twenty-five or thirty vessels of various sizes, from small dippers to large ollas holding several gallons, all of the same gray-white color with black decorations on the edges, shattering them on hard pavement, mixing up the pieces, throwing out about a third of them and then trying to sort and glue the remaining shards together again, and you will understand our problem."

Bennett was asked if he would like to go on another such excavation trip, and he replied, "I would love to if I had the time. It was one of the most interesting experiences of my life."

The interest with which he talks of his experiences shows that he has not escaped "excavator's fever" or the lure which buried secrets hold.

The history of Mesa Verde and its earliest inhabitants is the story of three civilizations. The first civilization that built their homes on the mesa lived there over 2000 years ago. They are called the Basket Makers, for as yet pottery had not been used in that region.

These people disappeared into the unknown and many years later another civilization arose, known now as the Pit House people. Their homes must have covered the mesa as the pinyon, for the potsherds of countless vessels strew the ground like a carpet. Not a foot of ground can you tread, says Bennett, without realizing that it has been trodden many times before. But, numerous as these people were, again they disappeared as they came, leaving only the traces of their existence.

For a third time a civilization arose as mysteriously as the previous ones and built picturesque little villages, and again, as had happened to these

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